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World water shortage

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## 21st century oil

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Leader

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The Swiss Alps have been gleaming whitely outside the windows of the World Economic Forum, where there have been seven different sessions on water scarcity, part of the summit's ambition of "catalysing a new global collaboration". The Alpine scene is regularly enhanced by artificial snow, the manufacture of which takes more than a third of all the water consumed in Davos, where water shortages are becoming a problem. It is not alone. Within 20 years 3 billion people will live in water-stressed areas, and only some of them will be in Africa or Asia: water has become a problem of the developed world. This could be why an unlikely alliance of Coca-Cola and Pepsi (the latter castigated for selfish use of a scarce resource in developing countries), as well as the Dow Chemical Company and other multinationals, have drawn up an initiative charting a possible way ahead.

According to the UN, everyone needs a minimum of 20 litres of water a day for healthy living. Flushing lavatories uses about 50 litres a day. If the "embedded" water in everyday items is considered, rich-world consumption runs at an exorbitant 3,000 litres per person a day. A cotton T-shirt takes 27,000 litres of water to manufacture. A kilowatt-hour of coal-powered energy takes 1.6 litres of water (clean coal takes more), and nuclear energy 2.3 litres. As the global demand for goods spreads, so the demand for water will soar. And that is before factoring in the impact of climate change.

Meanwhile, to meet the millennium development goals, 360,000 more people need to get access to clean drinking water every single day between now and 2015. Achieving that goal is vital to establishing the virtuous circle that sees people in healthier families work more productively.

The rich world needs to save water - no more snow cannons. But developing countries too need to change their thinking. Water scarcity cannot easily be solved on a project-by-project basis. Instead the Davos gurus suggest a brokering network that maximises the value of projects by coordinating them, trying to meet the needs of both people and of industry.

Projects in India and South Africa, using aid to leverage private capital, are already under way. In the Hartbeespoort dam project, a pipeline is under construction to take non-drinking water to replace the drinkable water that industry currently uses. In India, micro-technology to provide clean drinking water in Uttar Pradesh will also create

opportunities for very small-scale, water-carrying businesses. The gurus say their interests are served by building the bottom layer of the pyramid, a seedbed for future markets. Sceptics will wonder if it will end up with the poorest paying disproportionately for the resource it most urgently needs.

· This article was amended on Friday February 1 2008. We said that it took 1.6 litres of water to produce a kilowatt of coal power energy when what we meant was a kilowatt-hour of coal-powered energy. This has been corrected.

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